

LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE & FISHERIES
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Waterfowl Population Estimates
in Louisiana's Coastal Zone Below
U.S. Highway 90 and on Catahoula Lake

Date: Coastal Zone, November 5-7, 2007
Catahoula Lake, November 1, 2007
Northwest LA: October 31, 2007
Northeast LA: November 1-2, 2007

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Pilot: B. Dorsa

Estimates made from Aircraft (**) Estimate less than 1,000

SPECIES	SOUTHWEST	SOUTHEAST	CATAHOULA LAKE	TOTALS
MALLARD	22,000	3,000	**	25,000
MOTTLED	43,000	22,000		65,000
GADWALL	410,000	67,000	21,000	498,000
WIGEON	8,000	3,000	9,000	20,000
GW TEAL	152,000	11,000	**	163,000
BW TEAL	432,000	22,000	1,000	455,000
SHOVELER	151,000	2,000	5,000	158,000
PINTAIL	131,000	11,000	56,000	198,000
TOTAL DABLERS	1,349,000	141,000	92,000	1,582,000
SCAUP	1,000	3,000		4,000
RINGNECKED	28,000	16,000	3,000	47,000
CANVASBACK				0
TOTAL DIVERS	29,000	19,000	3,000	51,000
TOTAL DUCKS	1,378,000	160,000	95,000	1,633,000
COOTS	170,000	191,000	4,000	365,000

COMMENTS:

The estimate of 1.6 million ducks on this survey is 30% lower than last November's estimate of 2.3 million

and 25% lower than the 30-year average of 2.1 million. However, it is similar to the 5-year average (1.7 million) and higher than estimates for the 3 years prior to 2006. There were more blue-winged teal and pintails compared to November 2006, about the same number of mottled ducks and green-winged teal, and fewer of all other species. All species were lower than their long-term November average except for blue-wings and shovelers. Noteworthy from this survey is that far fewer gadwalls (498,000 vs 1,349,000) and far more blue-winged teal (455,000 vs 99,000) were seen this November year compared to last. Along with the fewer diving ducks seen this November (51,000 vs 178,000 in 2006), that accounts for most of the difference from last year. Although we counted very few scaup and no canvasbacks in coastal Louisiana, we noted a raft of 12-15,000 scaup offshore south of Marsh Island and a few smaller flocks in the open water of Vermilion Bay.

As we have seen since January of 2006, the distribution of ducks in coastal Louisiana was strongly skewed toward the west. Ninety-percent of the total ducks were seen west of the line between Marsh Island and New Iberia, with exceptional concentrations in the marsh north of Pecan Island, the western portion of Rockefeller Refuge, and the East Cove Unit of Cameron Prairie National Wildlife Refuge. Populations at Cameron Prairie and Rockefeller were dominated by gadwalls while very large groups of blue-wings were counted south of White Lake. Conversely, ducks were sparse in southeast Louisiana with only a fair number of ducks, mostly pintails and gadwalls, seen off the survey lines in the Mississippi and Atchafalaya River deltas and a good number of mottled ducks in the marshes around Delacroix.

An additional 84,000 ducks and 63,000 geese (70% white-fronts, 30% snow) were counted in select habitats of northeast Louisiana. That is far lower than the 316,000 ducks and 214,000 geese seen last November when a combination of both excellent water conditions from excessive late-October rainfall and early extremely cold weather created habitat and migration conditions that led to such high counts in that portion of the state. However, this year's counts are similar to those reported in 2004 and 2005. Habitat conditions are much drier this year, with only a small amount of managed water available on the landscape and no backwater flooding in the major river systems. Gadwalls, mallards, and pintails were the most abundant species and good concentrations were found on flooded agricultural fields southeast of Monroe in Richland Parish and southeast of Bonita in Morehouse Parish.

We counted another 11,000 ducks on the northwest Louisiana survey, primarily on the locks, lakes, oxbows, and fields along the Red River and upper Toledo Bend reservoir. This is also much lower than the 21,000 counted last November, but is comparable to the 12,000 counted in 2005 and substantially more than the 4,000 in 2004. Mallards, gadwalls, blue-wings, and ring-necked ducks were the most abundant species, and the only concentration was found on some managed moist-soil habitat near Loggy Bayou.

Although we have an average number of ducks in the state relative to the last 5 years, all evidence indicates we are still early in the migration. Prior to this week's cold weather, there has been only 1 mild front since the end of summer. Biologists in Minnesota and the Dakotas reported delayed migrations, and it wasn't until late last week that they saw movements of birds into and through those states. Only recently, Missouri reported mallards migrating into habitat there. Given the unusually large number of blue-winged teal seen in coastal Louisiana along with low numbers of diving ducks and mallards, we expect there has not been sufficient cold weather to push ducks into the state.

Habitat conditions along the coast are very good in the marsh, but mostly dry in the agricultural areas to the north. Water levels in the marsh are low, but ideal for feeding ducks. Seed-producing annual vegetation was similar to last year's excellent production, and the submerged aquatic vegetation seems much

improved from last year and especially from its near absence in post-hurricane 2005. With the exception of the area south of Kaplan, much of the agricultural area in southwest Louisiana was dry, and duck abundance was understandably spotty in those regions. Similarly in northeast Louisiana, very little flooding, even in typically managed hunting areas was evident during our survey. Weekly rainfall totals have been running below average since early September and continued high fuel prices make it more expensive to flood habitat without help from precipitation. But we noticed pumps running in many areas across the state, so we are hopeful for improved conditions as the migration proceeds.